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XXI International Grassland Congress / VIII
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The XXI International Grassland Congress / VIII International Rangeland Congress took place in Hohhot, China from June 29 through July 5, 2008.

Proceedings edited by Organizing Committee of 2008 IGC/IRC Conference

Published by Guangdong People's Publishing House

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Equity implications of the changing institutional landscape in U.S. rangeland conservation

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Key words : conservation easements, working landscapes, policy, accountability

Introduction Increasingly, research focusing on ecosystem provisioning is identifying specific benefits of functioning ecosystems to human life, including production of oxygen, carbon sequestration, medicinals, pollinators, and so forth. In addition, research suggests that larger areas have greater capacity for production of multiple ecosystem services. These can include human habitation and use that supports or maintains ecosystem functions. The US has large areas of protected public rangeland whose management "in the public interest" has been severely contested since inception. Now considerable effort is going into conserving the large areas of private rangelands, or "working landscapes", that are among the most productive and biodiversity-rich U.S. ecosystems. Extensive livestock production has been found compatible with provisioning of a broad spectrum of ecosystem services. The challenge is this: as ecologists, we want to conserve large, intact, functioning ecosystems whenever possible, but as citizens we are concerned that both public and private conservation has contributed to concentration of land ownership and wealth. We ask whether the social and legal institutions underwriting present day private land conservation efforts are capable of protecting the public interest.

Methods This is a policy analysis. The shifting ethical landscape of rangeland conservation is examined, first reviewing the development and equity implications of government retention and management of rangelands, and then the evolution of mechanisms for private rangeland conservation and their equity implications.

Results and conclusions Although rights, entitlements, and responsibilities underwriting U.S. rangeland programs are complex and contested, equity has never been a product of federal rangeland conservation. In the first half of the twentieth century, a clear preference for cattle over sheep and capitalist market-oriented production over subsistence and/or community operations was a frequent cover for a larger preference for white over Indian and Hispanic ranchers [see for example *Omaechevarria v. Idaho*, 246 U.S. 343 (1918)]. Grazing lease allocation policies favored local landowners with ranch-sized properties. On the other hand in recent decades ranchers have argued that the welfare of local communities and ranching traditions and culture, and the original terms of their use of public lands, have been largely dismissed by government managers of very different educational and class backgrounds whose management serves a relatively wealthy urban recreation-oriented or second-homeowning public. However, in American public lands management in general, the benefits of public lands for the urban poor and others without capacity to make use of western wildlands has also been challenged (ORRRC 1962).

Private lands conservation often involves the transfer of public funds to large landowners in exchange for contractual agreements to maintain the land in certain configurations or uses, most often with no public access. One such tool is the conservation easement. The funding, requirements, benefits and monitoring of these easements is variable and not transparent to the public (Merenlender et al. 2004). Funding often comes from a variety of sources, including tax reductions. Though one oft-stated goal of a ranch conservation easement is to keep ranching families on the land, easements may be sold as part of a development project to reduce tax costs and increase profits (Wright and Anella, 2007). Easement lands may be purchased by status buyers using the property only occasionally for hunting, recreation, and entertainment. One interpretation is that American society is acquiring certain rights to private lands in order to maintain vital ecosystem services, but are the social and legal institutions inherent in these private lands programs sufficient to represent the interests of the broader public? This paper presents an ongoing argument exploring equity concerns.

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